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THE TRUE TEACHER

AN ADDRESS DELIVERED BY

EDGAR DUBS SHIMER, PH.D., LL.D.

AT A DINNER GIVEN BY

ΟΙ ΣΧΟΛΑΣΤΙΚΟΙ

TO

HON. THOMAS W. CHURCHILL

PRESIDENT, BOARD OF EDUCATION
CITY OF NEW YORK

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THE TRUE TEACHER

Not long ago I was called upon to sign an official document and also to attach to the signature my professional title. I signed my name and then, on the line below, I added the word "Teacher." My wife was looking over my shoulder at the time, and she asked rather quizzically, "Why did you write 'Teacher'? Why didn't you say 'Superintendent'?" My reply to this was, "Because, to my mind, 'Teacher' is the proudest title that any man can wear—if he deserves it."

Allow me, therefore, to speak to you from the teacher's point of view, and to set forth as fully as the brief time limit permits, and as simply as I can, what appear to me to be the essential functions in the process of teaching. This will, of course, compel me to speak largely in the abstract. As a counterbalance, I shall think in the concrete and keep in view one teacher in particular. This will hold me steady as I focus attention on separate characteristic qualities.

The name of this society, Οἱ Σχολαστικοί always reminds me of a great teacher, Doctor Frederick Augustus Muhlenberg, and of his regular correspondence in Greek with the famous Felton of Harvard. He gave me this life motto when he found that I had determined to become a teacher,—

"Μακάριοι οἱ πτωχοὶ τῷ πνεύματι, ὅτι αὐτῶν ἐστὶν ἡ βασιλεία τῶν οὐρανῶν."

Take that home with you, Οἱ Σχολαστικοί and translate it into your daily lives. You will find it sound practical philosophy. It is especially serviceable for the teacher who lives it. No teacher who suffers from pride of intellect, or who wraps himself up in robes of infallibility, ever enters into the kingdom of true teaching. "Blessed are the poor in spirit" holds true in every sphere of human activity.

Granting, however, the correct spiritual attitude of the teacher, what in the last analysis does teaching mean? What are the ends aimed at? Surely this question must be definitely settled before we can properly consider the various means to be used. In my judgment, formation rather than information is the end to be constantly held in view. If this be taken as the controlling principle of method and the paramount standard of practice, all else will naturally organize itself in due season. The outcome of it all will be

character, a sum total of habits and dispositions,—in short, power.

To teach means to train the sense-impressions of a child in such fashion that they will all receive adequate exercise, gradually and naturally become full-fledged sense-perceptions, and finally pass over into regulated observation. Then *to look* will mean *to see*, and *to hark* will mean *to hear*.

I am reminded of a college professor who complained privately that his juniors in geology could not perceive. One day after the study of a certain rock-formation, he took the class on an excursion, during which he led them to an outcropping of the strata under study plainly in view; but they did not tell him what it was. One of the students, indeed, barked his shin as he crossed the ledge. Of course, he had looked at the rock. Had he seen? Had he perceived? Had he observed? The professor thought not.

I am fond of telling the following story of my friend, Doctor Edgar Fahs Smith, Provost of the University of Pennsylvania, a famous chemist with a world-wide reputation richly deserved. Doctor Smith is a remarkably successful teacher. One day he stopped short in a lesson and said, "Young gentlemen, allow me to say that you fail to perceive. You look and perhaps you see; but you do not truly perceive, because you

do not regulate your perceptions; that is, you do not yet observe."

Thereupon, he took from his cabinet a large beaker and set it on the table in front of the students. Into this beaker he poured from various bottles a mixture of chemicals, —the vilest concoction to the taste that he could compound, but one that would not stain.

"Now, gentlemen, watch me very closely," said he, "and then do exactly as you see me do."

At this, the Doctor slowly and ostentatiously thrust his forefinger deep down into the mixture, withdrew it just as slowly, shook off the last suspended drop, and then rapidly put his middle finger into his mouth for a moment.

The students in company followed the Doctor's example, as they fondly thought. When they had got through with spitting and sputtering and the making of wry faces, the Doctor quietly remarked, "It is just as I told you, gentlemen. You do not yet truly perceive. If you had observed what I did (and here he began to repeat the performance) you would have noticed that the finger which I put into my mouth was *not* the one which I put into the beaker."

Sense-training, you see, means far more than the mere training of sense, the mere response to stimulus. Good sense-training

lends itself indeed to common-sense, a rare quality, yet one easily understood to be the power to refrain from acting on mere hearsay, to wait until all the evidence is in along every line of perception, and not to shoot off at half-cock upon the report of a single sense. The world is full enough of single-sensers.

To teach means primarily to develop sense-reactions and to exalt them into conceptions. To that end it means to give power to fixate the attention, and to hold it fixed as steadily as nature will allow; that is, to adjust it and readjust it easily in true concentration. Without such natural flitting to and fro, we have only the fixed attention of a monkey, an idiot, or a monomaniac,—the fixed idea of a hypnote.

To teach means to train the memory so that it may become highly retentive, swiftly reproductive, and faithfully recognitive. "*Tenaciter, faciliter, fideliter*" is the Latin motto for a good memory. The great mystery here is not retention, nor reproduction whether direct or indirect, but the inexplicable elemental power of recognition. How do we come to know that the memory trace revivified is like the sense-impression now appealing to us for the first time? The two have never before been together in our experience. Man may well stand in awe before such an inherency!

To teach means to give wings to the imagination and to train it how to fly. It is natural and right for a child to revel in a world of intensely vivid images, both congruous and incongruous. Profound insight and loving sympathy are needed to keep young Icarus from flying too near the sun. To teach means to regulate the flight, so that from the realm of fancy the child may pass out of the fairy, myth, and legendary age into constructive imagination with access of power gained by exercise, and not with loss of power because his wings were clipped to make him stay within the bounds of a too narrow curriculum.

To teach means to make the mind acute in detecting differences; and at the same time to make it keen in tracing likenesses, so that it shall not be lost in the multiplicity of particulars, but be able to rise above them to a general truth. The child learns to take apart and to put together. He learns to see the parts in the whole and the whole in its parts at the same time. This exercise in discrimination and assimilation constitutes comparison. The man who can discover true relations in making broad comparisons is the man whose judgments are sound and safe for continuity of thought in reasoning. No matter how irrefragable the logic may be, a conclusion is never stronger than the major premise.

To teach means more than merely to equip the intellect. It means to rouse the feelings and to refine them, to convert selfish emotions into social sensibilities, to make the child feel truly that beside him as a single self there sits a larger self, that he has his rights but that his classmates have theirs too, and finally that his conduct is not correct unless it can be made universal. In this realm the teacher's example is supreme. I have wondered whether Emerson was thinking of his teacher when he said, "How can I hear what you say, when what you are is thundering in my ears?"

To teach means to give intellectual illumination to the impulses, all of which are blind in themselves, and to convert these emotional outbreaks into desires worthy to become the core of motive. Every human being makes his own motive. He desires, deliberates, and chooses among the ends which he himself entertains. There is no such thing as external motive. A man's motives are his own created ideals. He cannot evade the responsibility of free choice in selecting the one to act upon.

To teach means most importantly, therefore, how to convert non-voluntary or attracted attention into voluntary attention, to bring about a full, voluntary self-control and thereby to establish selfhood.

With such a conception of teaching, it is

not too bold, I take it, to say that all along the line the pupil will in the very nature of things build ideals. Here he will take an idea, there an idea, and elsewhere perhaps but part of an idea. These he will fuse in his imagination into an ideal. Goethe's dictum that the imagination is the preparatory school for thought comes true. He will glimpse and reach after the highest ideal of the intellect, namely,—truth. Amid all the diversities of his manifold emotional experiences, he will stretch his soul with longing toward the highest ideal of the emotions, namely,—beauty, or harmony amid diversity. From his daily battle to keep an impulse at heel, and his joy over conquest of sin (perhaps in imitation of some hero, or for love of his mother), he reaches after the highest ideal of morals, of the will, namely,—goodness.

But the superstructure of his character rises still higher. He now has new footing. He makes the supreme effort of the human mind. He idealizes his ideals, and apotheosizes truth, beauty, and goodness into the grander, all-comprehending ideal—God. No true teaching, from my point of view, can be done except it be with the consciousness on the part of the teacher of the relation that exists between him and the Great Supreme Being whom he worships,—that consciousness to be expressed in daily conduct.

A teacher's power in the last resort depends upon what he is. Therefore he should in largest measure possess the qualities he seeks to develop. He should assuredly be a student, with a wide range, yet able to say, in all modesty,—

"I am a part of all that I have met;
Yet all experience is an arch where-thro'
Gleams that untravell'd world, whose margin
fades
Forever and forever when I move.

* * * * * * * *
* * * yearning in desire
To follow knowledge, like a sinking star,
Beyond the utmost bounds of human
thought."

The teacher must first himself know how the soul gropes out of darkness into light before he can guide another. Such a teacher I have had in mind to-night. I have repeatedly gauged his powers as he taught with fine tact, winning personality and sure success. He was a constant, careful, and reflective student. He made a full surrender of all his powers to the divine glory of teaching. The memory of his remarkable persistence brings to mind the words of Faustus,—

"Nature that framed us of four elements
Warring within our breasts for regiment
Doth teach us all to have aspiring minds;

Our souls whose faculties can comprehend
The wondrous architecture of the world,
And measure every wandering planet's course,
Still climbing after knowledge infinite,
And always moving as the restless spheres,
Will us to wear ourselves and never rest."

The soul of the true teacher is ever climbing after knowledge infinite. He wills to wear himself and never rest.

Gentlemen, I have been speaking of Thomas W. Churchill. For many years he and I were teachers of Oratory and English Literature in Evening High School. Similar tastes and aspirations, common joys and tribulations, brought us into close fellowship, heart answering heart and friendship ripening with affection. I know this man well. You could have given me no finer subject for discourse. Most of you know him as the President of the Board of Education of the City of New York. I, too, know him as President and as teacher to teacher; but I also know him as man to man.

I have for some time been deeply interested in literature for children. Let me tell you a story.

One night when all the engines in the Sunnyside freight yard had gone to bed, the superintendent found that three heavy freight cars had been left where they did not belong. He wanted to have them taken

over a little rise to the other side of the yard, so he went to the round-house to ask one of the engines to help him. As the haul was heavy, of course he went to the biggest engine first and said, "No. 26, won't you help me get some freight cars over the hill?"

"No, I won't," said No. 26. "I am too tired. Let me alone."

Then he went to the next biggest engine and said, "No. 54, won't you help me get some freight cars over the hill?"

"No, I won't," said No. 54. "I am too sleepy. Let me alone."

The next engine said, "Let No. 20 do it."

Every one of the big engines had some excuse and wouldn't help. As the disappointed superintendent was just about to leave the round-house he saw a pony-engine standing near the door. He had never thought to ask this pony-engine for help, but now he asked, half doubtfully, "Do you think, pony-engine, that you could help me get some freight cars over the hill?"

"I think I can," replied the pony-engine.

"Come along then," said the superintendent.

Soon the pony-engine had hitched himself to the cars and began to puff as he strained at the heavy load. Slowly and painfully he dragged the cars up the rise. You could hear him say in thin tones, with long drawn-out but determined utterance, "*I—think—I*

—can.——I—think—I—can." But just as soon as he got over the rise he fairly chortled, "*I thought I could! I thought I could! I thought I could!*"

It means great things to have a proper faith in yourself, whoever and whatever you may be. "That which we are, we are," says Tennyson. Not until a man has faith enough in himself to be the man that he is can he look the world squarely in the face and say, "I am. What I am, that I am."

When a man can truly say, "I am," and not till then, he can take the next step and just as firmly say, "I can." The old Roman was right when he said "*Sum ergo possum.*"

If a man can say, "I am, therefore I can," he has a consciousness that easily passes over into conscience. He becomes conscientious. For him opportunity means duty. As soon as duty dawns he says, "I ought."

Now comes the last step in the series. Let a man first be able to say truly, "I am," and believe in it with all his might. Then he can safely say, "I can," for he will have a just knowledge of the limitations of his power. Now let him consider the moral judgments involved in conscience and he will progress to "I ought."

Only by advancing through these three vestibules of spiritual activity, "I am, I

can, I ought," is it possible for any man to enter into the temple of the categorical imperative, and be able to say, of himself and for himself, "I will." Every mortal who wishes to possess himself must be able to say, "I am, I can, I ought, and I will."

That is the man, Thomas W. Churchill. Of him it will remain true at all times, though he may be made weak by time and fate, that he is strong to will, to strive, to seek, to find, and not to yield.

Gentlemen, let us rise and greet our guest of honor, Thomas W. Churchill.

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